

THE ALERT

By the Same Writer

Coming and Going
(Oxford University Press)

Collected Poems, 1905-1925

The Golden Room

Hazards

Islands

Fuel

(Macmillan & Co.)

A Leaping Flame, A Sail!

(Privately Printed)

THE ALERT

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To
Campbell Mitchell-Cotts

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There have been Happy Days . . .

THERE have been happy days—
Days of so crystalline a lucency
That, gliding by, they scarcely left a trace
Upon the palimpsest of memory.

Yet, had the soul not known
Those hours of luminous tranquility,
Hardly might it withstand, unoverthrown,
The onset of these years of tragedy.

The Soldier

As on the kerb she stood to watch
The soldiers swinging by
A dozen winked or grinned at her;
But one with steady eye
Strode straight ahead with dogged pace
And never glanced at her young face.

The grinning youngsters were forgot
As soon as they were gone:
Yet through a sleepless night she sees
That soldier striding on—
That soldier striding steadily
Towards an unknown destiny.

The Endless Night

“HALT! Who goes there?”
“Friend!” “Friend, advance one pace.”
A woman’s figure stepped out of the dark
Into his torch-light’s arc;
And, as he looked on that unearthly grace,
Startled, the sentry recognized a fair
And once-loved loving face.

“Halt! Who goes there?”
That she should answer “Friend!”—
She who, forsaken and forgot, should be

His ghostly enemy!
And now he knew together they must spend
The endless night, since, loyal through despair,
She claimed him in the end.

When the Plane dived . . .

WHEN the plane dived and the machine-gun spattered
The deck, in his numb clutch the tugging wheel
Bucked madly as he strove to keep the keel
Zig-zagging through the steep and choppy sea—
To keep zig-zagging, that was all that mattered . . .
To keep the ship zig-zagging endlessly,
Dodging that diving devil. Now again
The bullets spattered like a squall of rain
About him; and again with desperate grip
He tugged, to port the helm . . . to keep the ship
Zig-zagging . . . zagging through eternity;
To keep the ship. . . . A sudden scalding pain
Shot through his shoulder and the whole sky shattered
About him in red fire; and yet his grip
Tightened upon the wheel. . . . To keep the ship
Zig . . . zig . . . zig-zagging, that was all that
mattered.

Black-out

TIME out of mind the friendly cottage-light
Set on the fell's high shoulder through the night
Has cheered belated wayfarers—its gleam
In rainy dark or glimpsed through threshing snow
Solacing them with home-thoughts and the dream
Of rest at last beside their own hearth's glow.

But now no longer shines the lonely light,
And comfortless they travel through blind night.

Home

IN the black ruin of the street
One house, though badly blasted, still
Defiant stands as though upheld
By one old woman's stubborn will.

For she, in spite of all that they
Can do to oust her from her room,
Ignoring threat or blandishment,
Still crouches in the basement's gloom—

Still crouches as again with night
The raiders roar across the sky;
And keeps on muttering to herself
"I'll die at home, if I must die."

The Knitters

THROUGH the long sleepless hours she sits
With restless fingers knitting steadily
A woollen helmet for her son
To keep him warm when his battalion
Goes oversea—
A woollen helmet!—and yet all that she
Can do for him now that all else is done:
And as her needles twinkle in the light
Throughout the night
Behind her on the wall a shadow knits
Remorselessly.

The Home-Guard

A WEEK of Arctic weather snowing hard
Has levelled the fell-country in blind drifts;
And pitmen, members now of the Home-Guard,
In battle-dress are working through long shifts
To aid the shepherds, digging through the deep
And wind-packed snow to rescue buried sheep:

And they, so used to toiling in dim light
Hewing the hard black face of the coal-seam,
With pick and shovel cutting through the white
Soft crumbling stuff, in a bedazzled dream
Pause, as though puzzled every now and then
By the odd chances war may bring to men.

The Goldfinches

LAST year they watched together with delight
Goldfinches building in the lilac-tree—
Only last year, together, he and she—

But now a tempest in the Winter night
The nest, forsaken when the young were flown,
From out the crotch had torn; while she, alone,
Lay wakeful in their bed, and wondering
If in his darker bed in foreign ground
He, too, lay tossing, restless, or slept sound.

The birds would likely come again in Spring
To build a new nest in the lilac-tree—
The birds would come again—but he . . . but he . . .

The Long Shift

RELEASED from opened ladle-traps, the steel
Pours in a scorching stream that burns the air
About him to a white-hot glare
As sputtering it runs into the mould—
The molten steel that soon, a shape of cold
Grey metal, shall project the shells of death:
And, as he watches it with sobbing breath,
Worn-out by the long shift,
About him all the foundry seems to reel
And the high roof to lift
And crash with shattering clatter into hell
Before a screaming fusilade of shell.

The Pig

THE city-urchin, to the country new,
Unlatched the cottage-door and wondering stepped
Into a marvellous world of glistening dew.

After those nights of terror, he had slept
Safe in unbroken slumber in the still
Queer quiet of the country; and had leapt

Lightly from bed when he had caught the shrill
Crowing of cockerels at the distant grange
That basked in early sunshine on the hill.

He paused a moment, staring at the strange
Green world of growing things, still half in fear
To think that life so suddenly could change;

And for an instant almost longed to hear
The hum of traffic and to feel his feet
On the familiar pavement: but as the clear

Breath of the morning filled his lungs, a sweet
Solace of healing through his body flowed;
And he forgot the dead bomb-shattered street

That once was home to him: and then he glowed
With sudden wild delight, and shut the door
To chase a pig that waddled down the road;
And felt he'd never been alive before.

Nine o'Clock News

"ONLY one plane was lost"—the suave announcer
Broadcasts the news of the successful raid;
And the lone mother knitting by the hearthstone
Trembles, afraid,
As in her anguished sight
In flame a bomber crashes through the night.

"Only one plane was lost"—just five words spoken
Glibly—and through the quiet of the room
She hears them as an iron clangour sounding
The knell of doom,
And sees within the fire
A broken body on a blazing pyre.

The Shepherd

WITHIN a wattled cote on Ridgeway Down
Tending his labouring ewes by the faint light
Of his horn-lantern, through the cloudy night
The shepherd hears high overhead a flight
Of raiders making for some Western town.

Shielding the light within his coat, he stands
For a brief idle moment harkening
To that deep drone of death upon the wing;
Then turns to his own business, to bring
Innocent life to birth with tender hands.

The Abbey Tower

As, wounded, on the Libyan sand he lies,
The broad embattled tower
Familiar to his eyes
From childhood's earliest hour,
Dispelling the cold gloom
Above him seems to rise
Kindled by sunset, all about it flying
Jackdaws with gilded wing and burnished plume:
And in his ears as he is dying
Their homely cawing and the old careless chimes
Recall the innocent days
Of war-unshadowed times;
And once again with other boys he plays
Happily on the green slopes of the Sele
In the late sunset-light
While from the Abbey tower resounds the peal
Of ringers practising on Thursday night.

The Whistling Boy

THE whistling boy on his red cycle spins
Merrily down the slope
Towards the cottage—in his leather pouch
A yellow envelope:
And hearing that shrill whistling and the slurr
Of swift tyres recklessly
Braked at full speed, the woman at the door
Awaits him bodingly:

Then scanning the curt wire that he has brought
Wonders chance should employ
As the unchallengeable messenger
A careless whistling boy.

The Light-ship

STRETCHED on the foam-white deck, taking their ease,
The crew were basking on the Summer day
We passed the anchored light-ship on our way,
Running all-out before a following breeze;
When, sighting us, those men who lived to keep
Watch over the dark treachery of the deep,
Lighting the shoals that lurk beneath the seas,
Arose and, leaning on the bulwarks, hailed
Our little yawl: and as we Northward sailed
We kept on thinking of that friendly crew—
That friendly crew—although we little knew
That in a few short months their living light
Would be for ever quenched when brutally
A bomber swooping out of the black night
Should sink their helpless vessel in the sea
Whose peril they had beaconed faithfully
Through fog and storm above the shifting shoals—
For ever quenched—nay, but the memory
Of that brave vessel and those friendly souls
Basking in sunshine, 'mid the treachery
And malice of war's tempest burns more bright,
With quenchless courage beaconing the night.

The Lorries

NIGHTLONG the lorries rumble down the road—
The hooded lorries, each with its packed load
Of young lives from their home and kindred torn
And towards the battle through the darkness borne—
Young lives uprooted from their native soil
By war, and wrested from their useful toil
And happy play and all familiar ties
To serve their country under foreign skies
In unknown continents beyond the sea
And take their chance in war's haphazardry—
They, who in their own island-home had thought
To spend their days, by world-disaster caught
And rushed into the conflict to defend
Their birthright even to the luckless end. . . .

Nightlong the lorries rumble down the road—
The hooded lorries, each with its packed load. . . .

The Village Church

MEN in the Fourteenth Century
With loving labour cut the sod
And chiselled sandstone with the keen
Delight of craftsmen happily
To rear a worthy House of God
Among the elms in their snug green
And fertile dale among the fells:
And many hundred years the bells

Resounding over garth and field
Within the hearts of generations
Of peaceful villagers have pealed
Their gospel of delight in life . . .
But now those loved bells broken lie
Beneath the cold grey morning sky
Among a dusty wrack of rubble;
And villagers with hearts of trouble
And sore-bewildered by the strife
Of the blind bitter warring nations
Stand mutely on the mounded sod
Gazing at that wrecked House of God.

The Refugees

OVER a sea that ripples with the sheen
Of watered satin under the serene
Blue heavens the liner keeps upon her way
Westward; and on her decks the children play
At prisoners-base and hop-scotch, happily
Forgetful of what even now may be
Slinking towards them under the sleek sea,
Or what may hurtle out of the bland sky;
With innocent laughter and light-hearted cry
Rejoicing in the light of the young day.

The Voice

ALTHOUGH alert to catch the first faint drone
Of enemy planes approaching from the sea,
Within his inner ear incessantly
A voice kept murmuring in urgent tone—
A voice that he had known,
Had known and hated in the dead
And unimaginable days of old.

“We always quarrelled, you and I” it said;
“But now that I lie cold
Beneath the mould,
And you are left alone
To face the onset of hostility
Beyond the heart’s conception, I would give
Even the grave’s security
Once more to live,
And by your side to be
Bearing the brunt of evil, even though we
Must needs keep wrangling as in days of old.”

The Fireman

THE flames that he had fought nightlong
Still flared and crackled in his brain
As through the drizzling rain
He stumbled home again;

And still the raging roaring song
Of red-tongued ravin through his head
Raved fiercely as, half-dead,
He sank upon his bed.

He tossed awhile in restless dream:
And then it seemed that blissfully
Through green translucency
He sank and quietly

Lying on white sand watched the gleam
Of fishes swimming down a glade
Of weeds that gently swayed,
At peace and undismayed—

Of flame-red fishes flickering bright
In his serene unstartled sight,
Lacing the emerald night
With fiery-lancing light.

The Mountain

AFTER an hour of flying blind he came
Startlingly out of cloud into clear air;
And for an instant dazzled by the glare
He looked in dreaming wonder at the white
And snowy barrier of the mountain-height
That soared serenely in the cold moon-flame;

And for that dazed and dreaming moment he
Forgot his errand and a world at strife,
The load of death he bore, and all that life
Had called on him to do in an insane
Delirium of destruction, all the pain,
The anger and unending agony—

As, like a loadstone drawing his sick soul
Towards that cold white immobility,
The mountain-barrier held him tranced; and he
Longed only for the timeless calm of death—
To lie at peace . . . at peace. . . He caught his breath
And just in time his hand clutched the control.

The Tools

STILL doing her old chores
Of scrubbing down stone stairs
And sweeping office floors
And dusting desks and chairs—
While somewhere oversea
Her youngest lanky son
Who loved the carpentry
Was carrying a gun—
He who had always been
Cunning with tools and good
At making things, and keen
To turn a bit of wood
To something useful—he,

So clever with his hands,
Was somewhere oversea
Fighting in foreign lands—
Fighting, while idle lay
His tools till war was done
And he one lucky day
Should drop that senseless gun
And take them from their chest
And happily again
Should work with the old zest
With chisel, saw and plane.

The Homeward Bus

THE bus, returning from the market-town,
Packed full of country-folk, plump chattering wives
And lean and silent farmers, free-wheels down
Into a deep and dusky hollow; then
Noisily starts to climb the long hill; when
Above the engine's racket sounds the roar
Of planes; and suddenly a raider dives
Out of the low snow-burdened cloud and fires
Burst after burst; and rattling bullets pour,
Splintering the glass: and now with flattened tyres
And engine blazing slowly the bus stops;
While all about it spatters mercilessly
The hail of death, until the company
Of hapless country-people, homeward-bent,

Perishes in an untold agony
Of writhing roaring flame . . .

So quietly
They'd lived among their native fields from birth,
Concerned with neighbourly affairs; intent
On wresting a subsistence from the earth
From which they sprang: the weather and the crops,
The village gossip and their children's ways,
Before the troubled years had come, enough
To fill their minds through the long busy days
And quiet nights; and, taking smooth with rough,
Finding life good: and trusting when the end
Should come, as come it must to all, to rest
Among their kin and neighbours, friend by friend,
Lapt safely in the green earth's kindly breast!

The Look-out

As, lightless, up the Skaagerack they stole,
Alert for danger from the sky or sea,
And eerily an unknown sea-fowl wailed,
The look-out saw strangely familiar forms
Arising from the waters quietly
And gathering round the trawler in the dim
And moony haze; and knew within his soul
Old shipmates, lost in action, who had sailed
These seas with him and braved their blasting storms,
Had roused from restless sleep to welcome him.

The Housewife

THE sirens sound; but, heeding not at all
Their warning, out she comes with brush and pail,
As she has done each morning without fail,
To wash her doorstep though the heavens fall.

Neighbours

NEIGHBOURS for years, they'd never even spoken
Till their indifference by a bomb was broken,
Till, blowing out their windows, the blast shattered
Their smug reserve. Now, like old friends they chattered.

The Alert

THE wavering siren screams; but in the street
The traffic keeps on moving; and no less
The shoppers go about their business,
Taking their time and with unhurried feet:

For life is life still, with its joy or hurt;
And mortals at the best live chancily;
And little would be gained if they should be
Startled too easily by death's alert.

The Sniper

CROUCHED low among the gorse that topped the fell
With ragged crest of gold, the sniper saw
A buck-hare sitting upright in the bent
Washing his neck and ears with well-licked paw,
Too happily intent
Upon his job to know that he was well
Within death's range. The sniper grinned to see,
And muttered "Just my luck!
But you may thank your stars, my buck,
That you're no whelp of sin from Germany!"

The Crew

THEY'D seldom much to say, the men I knew:
Their words, though forcible, were few,
Yet seemed to serve their purpose well enough
When things were easy or when luck was tough:
And, as their craft went down with all her crew,
I'll warrant that they did not waste their breath
In argument with death.

The Ploughman

HE heard a plane above him; and, as he
Looked up, something was loosed and, crashing, dropt
The other side the hedge in Badger's Hurst.
He whistled to his horses and they stopt:

But, when there came no burst,
He jerked the rein
To start his team again,
Mumbling "It's but a time bomb, seemingly".

The Listening Post

FROM the high Border hilltop listening post,
Harkening for raider planes, he saw the host
Of the steel-bright battalions of the sky
Glittering in glory as the night went by—
The starry companies and lone sentinels
Of heaven keeping watch above the fells,
As they'd kept vigil in old years when still
The Roman sentries paced this very hill
Through the nightwatches, tramping back and forth,
Alert for raiders out of the wild North. . . .

Still the same stars, each to his station true,
Kept watch; though now old evil armed with new
And unimaginable weapons hurled
Night after night destruction on the world. . . .

Still the same stars—and their cold steadfastness,
Even their indifference to man's distress,
Steeled his young heart to sternness and endured
His spirit with celestial fortitude.

The Homestead

INTO the raw dark of the Winter morn,
Bearing a dim old lantern glazed with horn,
He stept, and crossed the yard towards the shed
To milk the cows that lowed uneasily.
Unthinkingly he walked; when suddenly
Hearing a plane that whirred high overhead,
He stumbled, startled; and the lantern's door
Swung open, showing a faint gleam of light:
And instantly the sky, still black as night,
Was by a screaming hurtling terror torn . . .

The farmer heard that scream—and knew no more . . .

A raider in retreat towards the sea
Had jettisoned his bombs haphazardly,
To lighten his plane's load, and homeward sped. . .

And now a crater gaped where the farmstead
Had stood time out of mind—the well-loved home
Built in unhistoried days out of the toil
Of men who, faithful to their native soil,
Year after year had tilled the generous loam
Of Goldenacres, son succeeding son,
Inheriting a reputation won
By honest labour and fair dealing: all
Those generations of life-loving men
And women by a luckless hazard brought

To nothing . . .

A young airman who knew naught
Of them or theirs, in flying home again
Had lightened his plane's cargo, letting fall
Death casually upon the countryside,
And ended that long tale of love and pride.

Shells

ALL day like an automaton
She fits the shells into the gauge,
Hour after hour, to earn the wage
To keep her and her little son:
All day, hour after hour, she stands
Handling cold death with calloused hands.

She dare not think, she dare not feel
What happens to the shells that she
Handles and checks so carefully,
Or what within each case of steel
Is packed as, hour by hour, she stands
Handling cold death with calloused hands.

The Air-Raid Warden

IN the dark hours before the Winter dawn
He left his home, still sleeping with blinds drawn
And as, once more
Stealing out quietly he closed the door
Gently and, turning, strode

Down the unlighted road
Towards the wardens' post to take his place
Among his comrades, though he felt the raw
Bite of the wind, still in his mind he saw
His wife and children lying in their beds
Wrapt yet in slumber with dark ruffled heads
At peace on rumpled pillows, each dear face
Tranquil in the forgetfulness of dream,
For a brief while unconscious of the threat
And menace that beset
Each wakeful moment in a world at war.

The siren sounded; and a searchlight-beam
Picked out a raider. . . . As the guns began
And bombs screamed, hurtling, towards the post he ran
With racing heart. . . . Yet, still within his mind
He saw those innocent faces calm and kind.

The Heap

STILL in the crystal light
Of Winter's cold sunrise
A heap of rubble lies.
As in hag-ridden sleep
With unbelieving eyes
He stares at the still heap—
That heap that but last night
Was home—that heap that lies
Still in the crystal light
Of Winter's cold sunrise.

The Birch

ON the bomb-crater's very edge, a birch,
By some strange miracle escaped the shock
When the explosion scattered sand and rock
A few yards only from its perilous perch,
Baring its roots, stands quivering; and the sheen
Of its slim sapling bole shows silver-white
In the first gleam of early morning-light
Among its tracery of April green.

Deep-bedded rocks were shattered and the sand
That time had piled for centuries was hurled
Broadcast; and yet this slender silver tree
Survives, a living banner in a land
Death-ridden, to a devastated world
Proclaiming youth's green reckless bravery.

The Fire-Watcher

As from his watching-post upon the high
Cathedral parapet his gaze strayed down
To streets and lanes of the still, lampless town
That slumbered through the menace of the night
Uneasily beneath the cloudless sky,
It seemed to him to lie
Like a dead city in the cold moonlight
Lapt in quiescence of eternity—
His town, whose every living pulse he'd known

As his own heart's—while he,
The last inhabitant, was left alone
To keep
Above its deathly sleep
Eternal vigil on that ledge of stone.

Leave

IN tense uneasy silence or in brief
Bright bursts of chatter on indifferent
And trivial matters their last day is spent;
And when the hour strikes almost with relief
They part, and from each other turn away.
Leaving unsaid the things they dare not say.

Deep in their hearts the springs of mutual woe
Quiver as smilingly they bid farewell,
Averting tingling eyes that fear to dwell
Delayingly, lest grief should overflow
As, now their last swift precious day is sped,
The silence utters all they left unsaid.

The Swallow

HE dropped and lay slumped down upon the raft;
And so the bomber that had sunk their craft
And murdered all his mates, thinking him dead,
Ceased firing and zoomed steeply overhead

Into low cloud: and, as it disappeared
And left him, still alive, the lad's brain cleared
Of panic fury; and the blood-red light
That had inflamed his eyes throughout the fight
When he had manned the boat's gun, crazed and blind
To danger, faded, leaving his young mind
Coldly aware that he alone was left
In a wide waste of shipless sea, bereft
Of all the old familiar company
That he had known since he first put to sea—
Terny and Hooky Walker and Black Jim,
A surly sod, yet always kind to him. . . .

But they would not bear thinking of . . . The chill
Of his soused duds soaked into him until
It searched his vitals; and he'd got a thirst—
Lord, he was dry! although it seemed when first
He tumbled in the water as though he
In one big gulp had swallowed all the sea;
And he was hungry, hungry as a gull.
His eyes ranged the horizon; but no hull
Hove anywhere in sight 'twixt the low sky
And flat grey waters stretching endlessly.
He was alone, who never on sea or shore
In all his life had been alone before—
Alone, alone, alone—the silly word
Kept beating in his head . . . Of course he'd heard
Of loneliness; but never had he known
Its meaning until now—alone, alone,

Alone, and likely . . . But he dared not think
How it might end . . . if he'd a drop to drink
And just a bite of something he would be
All right enough, and not keep crazily
Mumbling the silly word—alone, alone . . .

And now the cold that pierced him to the bone
Numbed him nigh/senseless; and throughout the day
Huddled, dead/beat and slumber/logged, he lay
Upon the drifting raft.

And then again
Life stirred with a keen twinge in his dull brain
As he awaked and watched with dazzled sight
The level lances of the sunset/light
Splintering on the waves. The sky had cleared;
And the gay glancing sparkles a moment cheered
And quickened his young spirit as he gazed
Upon the quivering glory, still half-dazed.
And then he heard a flutter in his ear
And, startled, looked around in sudden fear;
And now laughed foolishly to think that he,
Alone and helpless on the open sea,
Should have been scared by such a harmless thing:
For by his side with feebly fluttering wing
And weakly twittering a swallow lay—
A swallow that had wearied on its way
Southward, and dropt down on the raft to rest.

Snatching it up, he clasped to his cold breast
That morsel of warm life; and as he heard
Its anxious twittering he blessed the bird
That, so it seemed to him, had crossed the sea
And sought him out to keep him company.

December Daybreak

SHRILL, a joyous scream
Startled me from dream—
Starlings in a stream
Flying past the pane,
Darkening its bleak gleam—
Starlings roused to flight
From the roosts of night
By the blink of light
As day broke again
Over Salisbury Plain
Chilly and rime-white.
And, still drowsing, I
Watched them flutter by,
Screaming eagerly,
Far afield to fare;
Till at length the sky
Emptied, and the old
Misery untold
On my heart laid hold,
Wakened and aware
Of the world's despair

Icing it with cold—
As I recalled, even while that happy flight
About its innocent business passed from sight
Throughout all Europe in the morning-light
Men soared on heaven-ascending wings to fight.

Passengers

IN the war-darkened train
That travels cautiously
Through a black land lapt in obscurity
So that no gleam may guide a raiding plane
We journey Northward, passengers of night;
And in the packed compartment scarce can see
Each other's faces in the vague blue light.

Brooding we sit, a quiet company
Of seeming ghosts; and only a deep breath
Or stir of restless limbs betrays that we
Are living mortals yet with hearts that bear
The burden still of life's perplexity,
And not untroubled wraiths who fare
Hopeless and fearless through the realms of death.

Unsheltered as a Hare . . .

UNSHELTERED as a hare
That crouches in her form
On uplands bleak and bare
Beneath the midnight storm,

And sees the wild-fire flash
With flinching eyes, and hears
The brattling thunder crash
About her quivering ears—
In utter nakedness,
Beset by all the powers
Of darkness, in the stress
Of world-wide tempest cowers
My spirit that was born
In days that knew no care
And ranged the hills of morn
Light-hearted as a hare.

Over the Air

A N orchestra somewhere in Germany
Plays the Fifth Symphony as though no war
Were devastating Europe, still intent
To honour music though disaster loom:
And as we listen in our cottage room
The charm of instruments in clear consent
Steals through the throbbing of the planes of doom.

Over the air, through which the fighters fly
To clash in battle under the cold stars,
Immortal music surges wave on wave
From land to land at mortal enmity,
As though it sought in healing harmony
To bind men's hearts in concord and to save
A blind world blundering to catastrophe.

The Trench

OF old in the garden a trench would be
Digged shallow for seakale or celery—
Yet, heaving the very subsoil in a heap,
Here are we delving a pit, grave-deep,
Where sunlit blossoms of beans and peas
Like butterflies flickered and glanced in the breeze,
Or, sparkled with dew, of a quiet night
Poised, silver-winged moths, in the rapt moonlight;
With straining sinews and hearts dismayed
Digging a pit with pickaxe and spade
Wherein our children may cowering lie
While death cataracts from a cloudless sky.

The Herd

LIKE a bunch of stubborn steers
That the drover strives in vain
To chivvy down a twilit lane,
Baulking, whisking round again,
Sore-beset by unknown fears—
So the wild thoughts in my brain
In these latter desperate years,
Harried by the switch of pain,
Plunge and check in an insane
Panic as the darkness nears.

The Kiel Canal

AFTER long weathering a troubled sea,
The sport of treacherous fog and tricky squall,
We lowered sail and ran our little yawl
On the auxiliary-engine, restfully
Gliding through the Canal—on either hand,
The pleasant meadowland
Of Northern Germany
Basking in Sabbath calm,
With only here and there a quiet farm,
A placid angler, or a tethered cow,
To break the verdurous monotony:
And, even now,
In a distracted world that falls in wrack
Before the onset of barbarity,
My heart at whiles hearks back—
Lapsing in dreamy memory
Down tranquil reaches of green lucency
To that long Summer day's felicity.

Baltic Night: A Memory

DOWN through the silent empty streets of Kiel
Between dark sleeping warehouses we steal
Until we come to the deserted quay,
Ablaze with light; and quietly
Unhitch the dinghy's painter; and with oars
Dripping with phosphorescence glide
Into the radiant mystery

Of the unruffled Baltic tide,
Tranced by the witchery
Of the full moon, a visionary sea
Of white flame lapping legendary shores:
And, shipping sculls, we let the little boat
Drift through the dazzle till the lucency
Drenches our bodies, sluicing them of all
Gross earthly substance; and we seem to float—
Like disembodied spirits, free
Of mortal cares, escaped beyond recall
From human tribulations—in a white
Eternity of light.

What's There to Fear

WHAT'S there to fear—when every night more thankfully
I turn to slumber from the agony
Of this bedevilled world to seek in sleep
Oblivion sound and deep;
And rouse each morning more reluctantly
Only to face again
Desperate suspense and dire contingency
In a world shattering to calamity
Before the shock-troop onset of insane
And suicidal tyranny
Battering and trampling into misery
The weak and helpless till the world shall be
One vast morass of blood and tears wherein

Must founder all humanity—
What's there to fear, should I,
Cheated in life of all I sought to win,
One dawn indifferent to the chill daybreak,
Having at last attained security,
Lapt in the ultimate oblivion lie
And never wake?

Hope

BEFORE the storm broke, the intense
Oppression of suspense
Lay on our burdened spirits heavily
Until we seemed to sink in apathy:
But when at length the lightning flashed
And thunder crashed
Through the black vault of heaven, terror-torn,
Out of the spirit's labor hope was born.

The Little Bay

BARBED-WIRE entanglements and barriers
Of concrete guard the approaches of the bay
Where in the sun and rain of early years
Our children loved to play:

And their grown minds, too, robbed of innocence
Of childhood by these days of evil strife,
Necessity embattles in defence
Against the assault of life.

Yet, when the panic stress of hates and fears
And nightmare agony have passed away,
May they in peace recall those happy years
In that enchanted bay.

The Sentry

As the dawn flushes the vast desert-sands
Leaning upon his grounded gun he stands,
And idly thinks what they'll be doing now
At home . . .

His Dad, already with the plough
Turning the stubble of Long Acre—Ned
And Dapple in the traces; and in the byre
His Mother milking Rosemary or Bell,
Cowslip or Curly; while still snug in bed
Peter and Peg sleep soundly till the smell
Of rashers frizzling on the kitchen-fire,
Tickling their nostrils, rouses them. 'Twas well
For them, the lucky youngsters, they could sleep
With naught to trouble them but thoughts of school,
Nothing upon their minds, nothing to keep
Them wakeful through nightwatches in a land
Of stone and sand and naught but stone and sand . . .

But Dad and Mother, they'd be thinking—ay,
They would be thinking; though it would be hard
For them to picture him, who'd never seen

This world without end sand and rock sand scarred
And scoured to queer shapes beneath a sky
Of aching fire, who only knew the cool
Green woods and meadows round the farmstead . . .

Green!

If he could but refresh his tingling eyes
On green fields under rainy English skies . . .
Could watch the roach and pike in Harker's Pool
Beneath the overhanging willows dart
From stone to stone or through the Summer day
With noses pointing upstream gently sway
With flicking tails and quivering fins, until
Suddenly a big boulder seemed to part
In two, and soundlessly an otter slid
Into the pool without a ripple, when
They'd vanish like live lightning out of ken;
And he could only guess where they were hid . . .

But was this he—the lad who'd watched that day
Within the shadow of the ruined mill
Beneath the slanted willows drooping green
The sunlight on the rippling waters play
And those lithe quivering fish, and who had seen
The otter slide—he, who now watched alone
In a scorched wilderness of sand and stone
And sand and stone and naught but sand and stone
Until it seemed that he had never known
In all his life aught else but sand and stone . . .

Ay, Dad and Mother, they'd be thinking . . . Hard
For them to picture him; but he . . .

And now

He sees again the slowly-moving plough;
And then his mother crossing the stack-yard
With brimming milk-pails . . .

They'd be thinking, too;

And what they would be thinking well he knew.

The Survivors

AND they were left together in a boat—
They two, of all their fellows, still afloat—
They who since ever they had put to sea
Day after day had wrangled bitterly
Until the quarrel flared, and in the grip
Of frenzied hate had grappled, when the ship
Was hit by the torpedo.

All the rest

Of the ship's company beneath the breast
Of the bleak heaving wave, by hazard flung
Into the instant cold of death, now hung
Suspended in dark fathoms, swayed and swung,
Hateless and loveless, in the ocean-deep:
And only they two now were left to keep
Each other company until . . .

They bent,

Straining above the sculls; only intent
To keep on rowing, and not think at all

Of what had happened or what might befall—
To keep on rowing, so they need not break
The silence that had followed in the wake
Of shattering disaster—to keep on
Rowing and rowing till their strength were gone
And they should sink across the thwarts, too weak
For speech; for they were both afraid to speak,
Although the hate within their breasts was quenched—
The flaming fury to cold ashes drenched
In the blind swirl in which the ship went down:
And though it seemed the ocean could not drown
Their bodies that had clinched in deadly strife,
And still together by the bond of life
Were held for some strange purpose . . .

Silently

They rowed on, whither, they knew not, nor why;
And kept on rowing under the grey sky,
And kept on rowing in the failing light
Until their little boat was lost in night.

And when their craft was sighted the next day
Locked in each other's arms asleep they lay.

In Hexham Abbey

LIKE spirits resurrected from the tomb
We step from the dark slype's low-vaulted gloom
Into the transepts' soaring radiancy
Where from the lancets of the clerestorey

Noon/sunshine streaming charged the pale sandstone
Of wall and pillar with a golden tone
Rich as the colour of the rock, fresh/hewn
From sheer Northumbrian hillsides to the tune
Of clinking hammer and chisel, in the days
When the aspiring spirit in life's praise
Soared in exultant fabrics of delight—
Earth/quarried stuff exalted to the height
Of man's imagination, heaven/entranced.

And, as with eager footsteps we advanced
Through the South Transept with enraptured eyes,
From off our hearts fell the perplexities
Of these calamitous times; and we forgot
Awhile the warring of nations and the lot
Of the battalioned youngsters doomed to march
Into annihilation—pier and arch
Springing in sunshine seeming still inspired
With the adoring ecstasy that fired
Those early craftsmen: and we recalled how man,
Builder and breaker since the world began,
Betrayed by frailties of the mortal flesh,
Is yet a phoenix soul that springs afresh
Resilient to the imperishable gleam
Out of the self-wrought havoc of his dream,
From devastation fashioning anew
His vision; and that to his best self true
Man, the destroyer, is Man, the builder, too.

The Promise

CLEAR crocuses are thrusting through the mould;
And from a wattled fold
Nearby
There comes a newborn lamb's keen quavering cry.

The world about us crashes in insane
Fury—and yet again
The earth
Brings loveliness and innocence to birth.